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SUBJECT: GOS STAGE MANAGES RESOLUTION OF ITS MANUFACTURED HOSTAGE
CRISIS

REF: A) KHARTOUM 345

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The MSF employees kidnapped by unknown abductors are free in Khartoum after a stage-managed hostage release. The identity and whereabouts of the hostage-takers are unknown, but all signs point to some level of coordination of the kidnapping by GoS officials. The Canadian Embassy's experience dealing with the GoS during the crisis suggests that the regime cannot be counted on to provide open channels of accurate information or to coordinate with Embassies to assist foreign citizens during a crisis. The GoS has again demonstrated to NGOs that their staffs do not have a secure space to operate and that only the GoS can guarantee their safety from the criminals it often controls. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) The Abduction: MSF staff told Canadian conoff that of the four men who entered their compound in Serif Umra on the evening of March 11 to carry out the kidnapping, one was wearing a jalabiya and the other three had military uniforms. (Note: The area is controlled by pro-GoS Arab militia and Chadian rebels, many of whom wear military uniforms of one sort or another, so the fact of wearing a uniform does not by itself indicate that the men were GOS military. End Note.) The five abducted MSF-B employees (Canadian, French, Italian, and two Sudanese nationals) were transported to the nearby town of El Serif. The abductors did not speak English, and allowed their hostages to inform MSF-B Headquarters of their abduction via Thuraya satellite phone. The now-released MSF-B workers reported that they were well-treated and not physically harmed by the abductors, who reportedly made a run to the market to buy the hostages cheese and cigarettes.

13. (SBU) The current whereabouts and identity of the hostage-takers are unknown, but the GoS has released public statements identifying them as a renegade group of pro-regime "Al-Bashir Hawks", who conducted the kidnapping in response to the ICC decision. State-controlled newspapers report that the group believed it was conducting the kidnapping "for the sake of the country." The Governor of North Darfur explained the abduction as "A reaction to that (ICC) decision and it is a form of expression that they (the kidnappers) chose." Former NISS Deputy Director Hassaballa Omer issued a statement warning of abduction of more international relief workers by groups similar to "Al Bashir Hawks" should any NGOs support continued pressure by the ICC against the GOS. There have been no indications that the GoS is prepared to track down and arrest the perpetrators of the MSF kidnapping.

13. (SBU) The Canadian Embassy reports that the MFA took a dismissive, blas attitude during the crisis and seemed to downplay the risk to the abducted MSF staff, telling the Canadians not to worry as the situation would soon be resolved. The Canadians and

French repeatedly requested high-level meetings with security officials to discuss the crisis, but were stonewalled. When the Canadian CDA requested a meeting with Sudanese security officials, he was advised to submit a note verbal to request a meeting to be scheduled 2-3 days later. From the MFA's attitude toward the crisis, the Canadians got the sense that the MFA already knew that the crisis would end as scripted.

14. (SBU) The GoS took the lead in negotiating with the kidnappers and did not involve the relevant Embassies. Initially, the kidnappers demanded 2 million pounds (approx 900,000 USD) and the withdrawal of the ICC arrest warrant for President Omar Beshier. When the abductors were informed that the GoS did not support the ICC demand, the kidnappers dropped their political request, then lowered their monetary demand to "whatever you can give us." The GoS claims that the kidnappers later released the hostages without receiving any ransom. (Note: The Canadian Embassy also informed us that they believe no ransom was paid. End note.) The lead negotiators with the hostage-takers were the local Governor of El Serif and the State Governor of North Darfur - the latter has appeared in the press touting his role in resolving the crisis, and was the first off the plane when the freed MSF workers arrived in Khartoum.

15. (SBU) On the evening of March 13, the GOS Humanitarian Affairs Commission (HAC) placed dozens of phone calls to report that the hostages had been released and were in transit from El Serif to El Fasher with Military Intelligence officials. This report proved to be false, as the hostages were still in captivity in El Serif. The Italian MFA passed the HAC's report to the media and the international press reported that the hostages were free. As it became apparent that this was not the case, numerous contradictory reports regarding the hostages' status/location flooded the media.

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The next day, HAC officials said that its false report was due to "technical problems".

16. (SBU) MSF-B officials, speaking through interpreters with the abductors via Thuraya, secured their agreement to allow multiple daily phone calls between MSF-B staff and the hostages. MSF-B set up a crisis team in Brussels. MSF-B was wary of close-collaboration with the Embassies and did not provide the Canadians with the phone number of the abductors, nor did it reveal its policy toward ransom payment.

16. (SBU) The Canadian Embassy quickly reached out to MSF-B to communicate its willingness to assist and its sensitivity to MSF-B's political neutrality. A Canadian diplomatic representative attended MSF-B's crisis team meetings in Brussels, which proved to be invaluable. The Canadians organized and facilitated daily meetings with MSF, the involved Embassies, and OCHA. GoS officials were not included in these meetings. The Canadians report that this cooperation allowed for information sharing, fact-checking, and coordination as the crisis played out.

17. (SBU) On March 14, the hostages may have been released as early as noon, but the Embassies were not informed by the GoS, even when their freed nationals were presented at El Fasher Airport to the press by the Governor of North Khartoum. The governor told the media that the MSF-B workers "are now, in God's grace, in front of you and in good health. They said that they were treated well." At 645 PM, the Canadians were finally contacted by an independent source in El Fasher and told the hostages had been released and would depart El Fasher for Khartoum.

18. (SBU) The three freed expat hostages were flown from El Fasher to Khartoum International Airport, where the GoS planned to present them at another press conference. The Canadians, but not the Italians or French, managed to get a car onto the tarmac to meet the arriving plane, which was thronged by 30-40 mostly-local journalists. The Canadians rushed all three freed expats into their vehicle, as GoS security officials demanded that they appear in the VIP lounge for a press-conference and threatened the Canadians' local driver with arrest. Only after the intervention of HAC NGO Commissioner Ahmed Adam were they allowed to depart. GoS officials

ordered them to travel directly to a nearby hospital where doctors examined the released MSF-B workers and issued reports noting that they had not been tortured. The three MSF-workers are now at the MSF-B guest house in Khartoum.

¶9. (SBU) The Canadians expressed frustration at the lack of engagement during the crisis by UNAMID as well as annoyance at UNAMID's communication with the press without coordinating with the involved Embassies. A source within UNAMID (name available via SIPRNET email) acknowledged that UNAMID currently has no plan to deal with the threat of kidnappings of international or national NGO staff. Alluding to the epidemic of carjackings that has spread through Darfur over the last several years, the source said that UNAMID has never had a plan for engaging local authorities in combating carjackings, and that has caused what was once an occasional occurrence to turn into a widespread phenomenon. (Comment: A comprehensive plan for preventing kidnappings would involve local law enforcement officials to work with UNAMID to track kidnappings, negotiate for their release and then pursue the kidnappers and bring them to justice. For the time being, however, UNAMID has no actionable plan to prevent kidnappings, and local authorities have little motivation to operate a functioning system of justice in Darfur. The UNAMID source foresees that the problem may grow with time. End comment.)

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: The hostage crisis and its resolution have all the signs of another regime-managed emergency designed to send a message to the international community that it needs the Government of Sudan to provide protection from the thugs whom it controls. If the abduction wasn't planned in its entirety by the regime, it was at least carried out with impunity by armed actors closely aligned with the GoS, in a part of Darfur controlled by janjaweed leader and government advisor Musa Hilal. Like the still-murky hijacking of a Sun Air flight from Nyala on Aug. 27, 2008, which concluded without arrests or explanation, the incident is one in a series of purportedly dangerous crises that the Government has mysteriously defused. The GoS sought to demonstrate through this managed, if not manufactured, crisis that the regime, not the embassies, NGOs, or UNAMID makes the call between life and death in Darfur. END COMMENT.

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FERNANDEZ